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ABSTRACT

This report by a former President of the American Council of Teachers of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) and Director of Foreign Languages Instruction in New York City Schools, concerns itself with five major areas. They include: (1) foreign language teacher and administrator relations, (2) a proposal for regional support teams, (3) the development of new courses, (4) interdisciplinary curriculum design, and (5) effective supervision and improvement of instruction. The article underscores the fact that assumptions generally held by educators in the last decade must be abandoned if language instruction is to survive in the coming years. (RL)

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WHAT IT'S ALL ABOUT: A FOREIGN LANGUAGE SUPERVISOR'S REPORT

Secondary School Foreign Language Symposium Indiana Language Program

Indiana University Bloomington, Indiana October 7, 1969

By Leo Benardo, Director of Foreign Languages, New York City Schools
President, ACTFL 1969

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I come to you this morning as the servant of two masters - one young, vigorous, growing, exciting; the other, old, weak, contentious, pained, and if one were to believe the news media, about to breathe its last. The former is ACTFL, the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, robust and thriving son of the Modern Language Association; the latter the New York City school system, that lumbering, strife-ridden giant which employs me as its Director of Foreign Language Instruction.

As President of ACTFL and as supervisor of foreign languages in one of the largest school systems in the world, I have been presiding over a massive group of teachers and students. Allow me, in this regard, a momentary foray into the realm of statistics, bearing in mind some wag's comment about statistics.

"Statistics," he said, "are like bikini bathing suits. What they reveal is merely suggestive, but what they conceal is vital."

First a look at staff size and student enrollment in the New York City schools. In September 1969 some 1,870 foreign language teachers were employed in the 80 high schools, 145 junior high or intermediate schools and 160 elementary schools which offer foreign language instruction to more than a quarter of a million pupils in ten languages: Chinese, French, German, Greek, Hebrew, Italian, Latin, Russian, Spanish and Swahili. The enrollment in Spanish - far ahead of the rest and zooming more rapidly than an olé in a corrida de toros - is 150,000 and French is second with some 84,000 pupils

enrolled. Italian, showing some signs of resuscitation in the last three years has climbed to third place with about 13,000. German with 3800 and Hebrew with 2300 are neck and neck but, O tempora! O mores! Latin trails badly with 804. Russian (502), Swahili (59) and Classical Greek (27) bring up the rear.

ACTFL, the new voice of language teachers throughout the country, is doing very well indeed. With an individual membership of 8,000, a substantial number of library subscriptions, constituent organizations in all but a few states of the union, affiliates in the modern and classical languages, a top-flight journal (FL Annals), a Britannica co-sponsored review of FL research in press, a design for the development of model summer language programs abroad beginning in 1970 - this young group seems to be headed for a rosy future.

The local and national pictures I have presented to you probably seem very bright and you might conclude that I have little or no cause for alarm. The inner-city is problem-ridden but at least FL enrollments are increasing; ACTFL, in two short years, has become an association to be reckoned with. God is, apparently in His Heaven, but I do not think that all is right with the world. Permit me to share with you some of my concerns.

1. FL teacher - School Administrator Relationships

I am delighted to see that school principals and superintendents have been invited to participate actively in this Symposium. This is a radical departure from the typical Foreign Language conference where FL teachers talk to one another, sometimes disagreeing but often agreeing, developing grandiose plans or programs which have little chance of implementation because the holders of the purse strings - principals, superintendents, local school board presidents - were not consulted, "educated" or involved in the design.

Many school administrators have neglected their foreign language departments not from a lack of interest in foreign language instruction but from fear. Too often their personal experiences with foreign language classes as students at the high school and college levels left much to be desired. Too often the foreign language requirement was, for them, a hurdle to be overcome, culminating in a deep sigh of relief when the last examination had been passed and the last required course completed. Too often the "technical" aspects of language instruction kept them at bay and the most comfortable course of action was to stay away and to allow the foreign language teachers to proceed "undisturbed".

This has created, alas, an unhappy situation. When language teachers and their local administrators operate on different "wave lengths" progress becomes difficult. For change to take place a dialogue between the school head and the language expert is a sine qua non.

If our programs are to grow and if the public is to give us the moral and financial support we need for such growth we must initiate that dialogue and nurture it. Let this Symposium lead the way to the active participation of school administrators at all major foreign language conferences.

2. Regional Support Teams

Many language teachers and supervisors who have attempted innovative programs or who have strayed from the "tried and true" even experimentally, have become painfully aware that we are never prophets in our own lands. School boards and superintendents have been conditioned to accepting the local teacher's plan only if it is supported by "experts" from other areas of the country. This attitude has tended to dampen initiative and to move

even some of our most creative colleagues to remain with the traditional and the familiar and to avoid "rocking the boat."

If the experimentation is to be encouraged, prophets from "other lands" must be ready to come to the support of their colleagues. In this connection I suggest the establishment of Regional Support Teams composed of highly respected foreign language teachers and supervisors sponsored perhaps by ACTFL - who will be prepared to endorse worthwhile programs developed by language teachers in other geographical areas.

Thus, a local supervisor in the Northeast who meets with resistance from his local school board and school superintendent to a sound plan for introducing a FLES program can call upon a Suppport Team from the Middle West or the Far West to serve as Amicus Curiae.

Such a network of mutual support would, I believe, help to unify the profession and motivate the fearful to chart new ground.

3. Development of New Courses

The theory that foreign language instruction should be offered to all students in a long, continuous, articulated sequence starting as early as possible in the elementary grades is still accepted as generally sound by most foreign language teachers on all school levels. It is clear, however, that some pupils may benefit from shorter courses with more limited objectives.

"Relevance above all else," urge our youngsters. And they may have a position worth listening to. A concerted effort must be made, particularly in the big cities, to develop more meaningful and practical language courses. Boys and girls preparing for careers as civil servants in New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, Detroit, Miami, Los Angeles and Indianapolis may need practical, conversational courses perhaps of one or two years' duration in order to function effectively as nurses, policemen, firemen or social workers. More and more, community needs for language instruction will - and should - dictate the kinds of courses offered in that community.

Political and social pressures may also give rise to community interest in language instruction. Witness the push for Swahili in New York City schools. Many black students -- and their parents -- felt last year that the study of Swahili would help them to develop a stronger sense of black-African identity. Over the objectives of many white and even a few black school and community leaders, the course was offered. Although black secondary school students did not flock to it in droves, the few who enrolled attended regularly and made significant progress in audio-lingual skills after a semester of instruction.

4. Interdisciplinary Approaches

In addition to new-type courses serious thought should be given to teaching some of the other disciplines in the foreign language. How much more effective a study in depth of the French Revolution would be if given in French to advanced students of French! How much teachers and students would gain in perspective by crossing discipline lines, by joint planning, by seeing language function as a real tool for communication.

The box-like, compartmentalized nature of the standard curriculum has left many students and teachers cold. It may be time to tear down those walls which have left the foreign language classroom isolated, distant and out of the mainstream.

5.Effective Supervision and Improvement of Instruction

A significant strength of the administrative structure in the New York City schools - I am happy to report that through the rubble and chaos I can find one - is the assignment of chairmen to the foreign language departments of junior and senior high schools. Unlike some other school systems in which the title of chairman is little more than honorary, a pittance for longevity, the New York City chairman competes for a "license" as such - fluency in two languages is required as well as demonstrated teaching competence - and is

responsible for the administration and supervision of his department. For this difficult and important task he is adequately compensated both in time and in money - a maximum teaching load of two classes and a salary level some three thousand dollars higher than the maximum for teachers.

The chairman thus serves as master teacher and as teacher of teachers, training and acting as a model for the tyro and serving as catalyst and friendly critic for the experienced hand.

I recommend that positions of this kind be developed in all school systems. Too often our young teachers are thrown to the wolves with few opportunities to observe highly effective teaching and even fewer to be observed by a recognized master. If the teaching quality in a foreign language department is poor or barely adequate all the new courses and materials in the world are meaningless.

These, then, are some of my concerns. Some of us have tended to coast a bit while the federal government supported our programs. Others have been reasonably certain that the FL program in secondary schools is a safe niche - unexciting perhaps, but at least highly academic, a requirement for college entrance, a prestige subject for the vast middle class. Still others continue to rely upon the notion that ours is a highly specialized "technical" area immune to attack from school administrators or community leaders.

Wake up, dear colleagues. Not only have the rules changed, but the game itself is brand new. Either we learn to play and play to win or we shall find ourselves gloomily on the outside looking in.